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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000110

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SUBJECT: FEB 9 TER-PETROSSIAN RALLY THE BIGGEST SO FAR THIS SEASON; UNREALIZE HOPES FOR OPPOSITION ALLIANCE, BUT PROMINENT VETERANS' GROUP MEMBERS ANNOUNCE SUPPORT

Classified By: CDA Joseph Pennington, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Ter-Petrossian proved February 9 that he can still bring out a truly large crowd (40,000) of supporters, at least for a rally. His speech hit hard against the current rulers for allegedly being ready to sell out Armenian land in the south -- and thus, Armenia's vital national interests -- in exchange for a secure Nagorno Karabakh. Several wealthy and influential leaders of the Yerkrapah NK veterans' organization announced their backing for LTP. END SUMMARY

¶2. (SBU) FILLING THE SQUARE: Levon Ter-Petrossian's (LTP) presidential campaign rally on Saturday, February 9, far outstripped all previous campaign events this season, of any candidate, in both attendance and energy. The local rule of thumb, which has aided us all year in our crowd estimations, is that Freedom Square has a maximum capacity of 40,000 people. If that is so, LTP's rally must surely have hit right around the 40,000 mark. The square was filled to overflowing, with additional crowds up the major approach pathways.

¶3. (SBU) INTENT MOOD: The crowd was also more energetic than in previous rallies we have seen, with their alternating chants of "Levon!" and of the Armenian word for "President." Armenian political rallies, in general, are quieter than one would expect, with relatively little shouting compared to political rallies elsewhere. Armenians bring a striking seriousness -- even studiousness -- to their political rallies. The measure of intensity is not so much in the noisiness but in the stillness; things tend to get quieter as participants get more engaged with the speaker, ceasing their small talk with neighbors to listen more attentively to the speaker at the podium. On February 9, there was a palpable difference in how the crowds reacted to the "warm-up" speakers, as compared to former president Ter-Petrossian. From the moment LTP took the microphone until he stopped speaking, the crowd's full attention was focused intently on not missing a syllable. Only when he finished, and Nikol Pashinian resumed the chanting of "Levon!," did the crowd relax its intensity. Rally leaders then embarked on a march around downtown Yerevan, but only a small portion of the huge crowd participated in the march.

¶4. (SBU) ...BUT NO DEAL: Many had come in hopes of hearing that LTP and rival candidate Artur Baghassarian had made a deal, and that Baghassarian would withdraw from the race in favor of the first president, prior to the February 9, 18:00 local time deadline for candidates to withdraw their names from the ballot. Despite tantalizing tidbits from several quarters that such a deal was close, there was no such announcement during the rally, and the deadline passed

without a deal. (NOTE: Popular opposition non-candidate Raffi Hovanessian met with Baghdassarian and Ter-Petrossian the night before the rally in hopes of supporting an alliance between the two men, but the talks ended without success. Such a deal could still be reached, but all candidates' names will now be on the ballot, raising the possibility of a divided vote. END NOTE)

15. (C) YERKRAPAH VETERANS JOINING UP: A notable announcement, however, was that several prominent members of the Yerkrapah war veterans organization had thrown their support behind LTP, rather than the prime minister: Hakob Hakobian and Sasun Mikaelian (both Republican members of parliament), and Suren Barseghian. These were the same Yerkrapah leaders that had earlier interceded in the town of Talin in an attempt to secure the release of several LTP supporters arrested for assault on an anti-LTP heckler during a rally there. (COMMENT: Yerkrapah remains an "X" factor in the upcoming race. In the late 1990s it was a powerful and active political force, comprising thousands of NK war veterans, fresh from that conflict. The vets were passionately devoted to their war hero founder Vazgen Sargsian, who was later killed in the 1999 attack on the Armenian parliament. It remains unclear whether Yerkrapah can still mobilize large numbers of veterans to either the ballot box or the streets. It is also unclear whether the organization will be politically unified. END COMMENT)

16. (C) KEY THEME -- NK: LTP's speech focused heavily on his allegation that in 1999 President Robert Kocharian came close to signing a Nagorno-Karabakh peace deal with Azerbaijan that would have traded away Armenia's southern Meghri region to Azerbaijan, in return for Armenia gaining full sovereignty over Shushi and Lachin in/around NK. LTP said he had a secret document -- which was later published in full in the

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pro-LTP Haykakhan Zhamanak newspaper -- detailing the proposal. LTP read aloud lengthy passages from the reputed 1999 document. He claimed in his rally speech that Kocharian had showed the proposal to then-PM Vazgen Sargsian and then-Speaker Karen Demirchian, who had categorically opposed the proposal just one week before they were assassinated in parliament. LTP called Demirchian and Vazgen Sargsian heroes for having stopped this "betrayal" of Armenia. LTP reminded listeners that Iran had been the country's only lifeline in the early-to-mid 1990s, while Georgia was in civil war and other borders were closed. He pointed out that a deal to give Meghri to Azerbaijan would encircle Armenia almost entirely by hostile Turkey and Azerbaijan. (COMMENT: LTP's goal here is to shore up a perceived weakness, but also to drive a wedge into the fracture point that exists between Karabakhi Armenians and Republic of Armenia Armenians. The implication is that the Karabakhtsis, Robert Kocharian and by implication Serzh Sargsian, were ready to sell out the land and interests of Armenia proper in exchange for a benefit for their own home enclave. He is also reinforcing his claim that Kocharian and Sargsian were responsible for the parliament shootings that so traumatized Armenia in 1999. END COMMENT)

17. (SBU) LIGHT SECURITY: Police presence at the rally was virtually invisible, though emboffs noted that a number of police vehicles were staged well out of sight, on the far side of the Opera House from Freedom Square.

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